

A MEDITERRANEAN BRIDGE OVER TROUBLED WATER.  
CULTURAL IDEAS ON HOW TO RECONCILE ISRAEL  
WITH ITS NEIGHBOURS AND WITH EUROPE

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The Mediterranean Sea links together three continents, three religions, and thousands of years of civilization, and has thus been a channel of mutual influences and cultural exchanges. These processes have formed the destiny of large Jewish communities. The historian Joshua Prawer drew attention to an interesting fact: "It should be pointed out that, without any causal relationship, the period of the closure of the Mediterranean was—in relationships, in the exchange of ideas and in trade—the period of the greatness of Judaism..." (Prawer, 1990: 9). According to the historian Shlomo Dov Goitein, the Jews lived along the coasts of the Mediterranean, and were an open, mobile people that were not closed up in their own world but, in the countries where they lived, inherited the culture of Greece and Rome and adapted it to Islamic culture. In his monumental five-volume work *A Mediterranean Society*, Goitein described a Jewish society of the Middle Ages that lived within the framework of Mediterranean geography and culture (Goitein, 1967–1988).

Goitein, as the first Hebrew University lecturer in Islamic studies, focused in his pioneering work on early Arab literature and society, and only later in his life began to concern himself with the medieval Jewish communities. His original project was to investigate the trade with the Indian Ocean, but his academic starting-point was the investigation of the Cairo *genizah*: "In the summer of 1958 I abandoned India and turned towards the Mediterranean." (Lassner, 2005: 23) In the documents of the *genizah* he examined, there was no special term for the "Mediterranean Sea", and the Arabs generally called it "the Sea of the Romans", "The Sea", or "The Salt Sea". Unlike Henri Pirenne, who saw a division in the Mediterranean, Goitein revealed an extensive Mediterranean trade between Christians and Muslims from the eleventh to the thirteenth century. In his opinion, the division in the Mediterranean took place with the spread of the tribes from Central Asia and the Caucasus to the Islamic countries. After the

Mamelukes and the crusades, the Europeans regarded the Mediterranean as a hostile area. Goitein's geographical sociology, which deciphered the documents of the *genizah*, portrayed the Jews of the Middle Ages as a Mediterranean people that developed its sources, disseminated its wisdom and was prominent in trade and the liberal professions in the countries of the Basin. His research depicted a Jewish society that was pre-modern in all respects: day-to-day life, commerce, law and way of thinking. It was an exemplary model for the study by Peregrine Horden and Nicholas Purcell, *The Corrupting Sea* (2001), which added to the net-like Braudelian structure of the macro, alternative micro-networks of areas and sub-areas, in the same way as Goitein. The precise reconstruction of the area of the Mediterranean between Tunisia and Egypt was revealed as a total history, a history of the mentality of the medieval Jews, and a historical sociology of the worldwide, country-wide and communal organization of the Jews, with a description of synagogues and prayers, the system of education, the legal system, the development of the nuclear family, and the women's world. The status of the Jews was perceived as a central axis in the Middle Ages between the Mashrek and the Mahgreb (the eastern and western areas of North Africa). Goitein himself became aware of Fernand Braudel's book only at the end of his researches: "I immediately regretted I had not done so earlier." (Kriener, 1990: 9)

Braudel was preceded by a year by Nahum Sloushcz (1871–1966), a writer and a philologist of the Oriental languages, in his study *The Book of the Sea. The Conquest of the Seas—An Aspect of the History of Civilization*, published in 1948. It is impossible not to notice the similar disposition, the Mediterranean compass and the creative imagination common to Sloushcz and Braudel. Sloushcz wrote:

The life-force in the land of life overcomes everything: the farmer who has nothing in Southern Italy, the penniless fisherman in the Isles of Greece, the ploughman in Provence and the peasant living on vegetables in the Balearic Islands have never changed their social form. They have remained steeped in light, full of charm and devoted to an ancient joie de vivre... (Sloushcz, 1948: 28).

With the same expansiveness, Braudel poetized:

In this book, ships sail, the waves repeat their melody, the vines descend from the Cinque Terre to the Genoa Riviera. In this book, olives are harvested in Provence and Greece, the fishermen draw their nets from the silent lagoon of Venice or the canals of Djerba, and the carpenters

still build ships similar to those of yesterday.... And at the sight of all this, we are outside time (Braudel, 1985: 1).

In Sloushcz's work, the connection of the "new Jew" to the Mediterranean is very important, and as David Remez (1886–1951), an Israeli political leader and a writer, says in his introduction to *The Book of the Sea*, "Our world was planted on the shores of the Mediterranean, the great sun of world culture." According to Sloushcz, the attractiveness of the Mediterranean still derives from the biblical sources: "Zevulun will live long on the shore", "Asher with his havens", "Dan will live on ships". This way of thinking draws inspiration from the past: "The actions of our forefathers were a sign for their descendants when the first ones wished from the beginning to restore the seas of our land to their original splendor as international conduits fusing the expanses of the east with the farthest regions of the west..." (Sloushcz, 1948: viii). According to Sloushcz, the young Hebrew *Tishuvah* (the Jewish-Zionist community in Palestine prior to the state of Israel) had the same task as the ancient Israelite society, and one therefore had to "renew the youth of our land as one of the strengths of the sea, commanding its ways and linking together countries and islands against the background of trade and the kinship of peoples." One had to vanquish hearts before one conquered the seas, and hence a Mediterranean consciousness and education through a sea-approach to Israel were essential to the crystallization of the Hebrew consciousness, as opposed to the conditions of exile: "The sea, a substance of much water in itself, as against the evil waters of exile that distance those who are near." (*ibid.*) As a result of this ideology of the Jewish people as a Mediterranean one, Sloushcz developed a historiography and a historical philosophy that emphasized his knowledge of the past of the Jewish people on the sea, and stressed the way of life and activities of the Jewish communities in the Mediterranean Basin. He characterized the Mediterranean Jew as follows: "A Mediterranean person of this kind is first of all a social person, one link in a great chain of similar people, who does not represent life outside the community in which he was born and in which he was raised." (*ibid.*: 27) Unlike the people of the north "who walk in darkness", the "heroes of the bright horizon of the Mediterranean" like Samson and David, Alexander and Socrates, Hannibal and Napoleon, were first and foremost natives of their cities, part of their environment, and felt comfortable in nature or in the public space.

David Ben-Gurion, the founder of the Israeli state, already at the ninth Zionist Congress in 1935 called for the Mediterranean character

of the state-in-the-making to be developed (Aronson, 1978; Karmon, Shmueli and Horowitz, 1983). Ben-Gurion persisted in his Mediterranean orientation, and even adopted the Canaanite narrative concerning the Hebrews as pioneers of Mediterraneanness, preceding the Greeks and Romans: "The fathers of seafaring, prime instrument of economic progress and the spread of culture for three millennia now, were Semitic tribes, speaking Canaanitish Hebrew and dwelling of old on the shores of Palestine - in Tyre and in Sidon and their off-shoots. Canaanite became a synonym for merchant and the word *kina* a synonym for wares." (Ben-Gurion, 1954: 299) Ben-Gurion outlined a maritime historiography of the people of Israel, quoted the Book of Ezekiel on the wealth and maritime power of Tyre and described the commercial relationships of the tribes of Zebulun and Asher with the people of Tyre. He said that the inhabitants of Israel and Judah did not learn seafaring from the people of Sidon because those living on the shore, the Canaanites to the north and the Philistines to the south, blocked their path. Throughout the period of the First Temple there was no Jewish harbor on the shores of the Mediterranean. There were no sailors in Judah and Israel until Solomon needed his friend Hiram, the king of Tyre, and afterwards there were a few maritime ventures in the time of Jehoshephat, who built ships at Ezion Gaber. Only in the days of the Hasmoneans did the Judeans succeed in reaching the shore and conquering Jaffa, the first Judean port and the only one on the Mediterranean in the late Second Temple period. The nautical history of the land of Israel brought Ben-Gurion to the conclusion that in ancient times, in the Middle Ages and in our own time, most of the wars in world history were decided by the maritime powers.

The Jewish people was not a nautical people in the periods of the First Temple and the Second Temple. The land of Israel was situated on two seas, the Mediterranean to the west and the Red Sea to the south, but it never had the use of the two seas. Only with the founding of the State of Israel, said Ben-Gurion, was the biblical promise—"I will set thy bounds from the Red Sea even unto the Sea of the Philistines" (Exodus 23:31)—fulfilled for the first time. The State of Israel is the only one of the Mediterranean countries to have an outlet on both the Atlantic Ocean and the Indian Ocean without needing the Suez Canal (this was said, of course, before the opening of the canal to Israeli shipping). "This settlement on the shores of both seas is the thing that is unique to the third return to Zion." On the return from Babylon, the Jews returned from the East and on land, but in the pres-

ent return to Zion, the *Aljiah* is from the West, via the sea. This connection with the sea has a political, military and economic importance. Without the sea, Israel would be a "city under siege"; without sea-power, strong land and air forces would not be effective. The sea is a convenient and cheap means of transport that contains foodstuffs and raw materials. The understanding and foresight of Ben-Gurion were indeed far-reaching: "The sea contains unlimited possibilities of settlement, and this is not a paradox. The sea is not a desert of water, as many people think." Ben-Gurion combined a maritime philosophy with a Promethean vision:

The sea covers the part of the surface, it has no frontiers, it is free. It is not divided among the State and the peoples that are on land, there are no partitions between the oceans, no barriers or confining bounds. A people with a territorial base and port may sail the world over and sound every sea, it may put a girdle about the globe and seek out every folic and speech. Land severs the nations, the sea unites them and brings them close; it advances the unity of mankind, opening new horizons and spaces invisible to us that stand on shore. Our forefathers, who had never sailed its length as their kin-folk of Sidon did, called the Mediterranean the Great Sea, but it is just a land-girt lake with a narrow exit to the Atlantic. On the broad bosom of the ocean man sees the elemental immensity of nature, for the mightiest man-made vessel imaginable is no more than a minute speck of sand in an illimitable expanse of water. He also learns his own greatness and the tremendous strength that is in him to control natural forces and rule the vastly deep. The man who bridges gigantic oceans in a frail craft of his own making, proof that quality transcends quantity, that the human spirit is superior to nature's measureless wealth of matter in the raw (Ben-Gurion, 1954: 311-312).

Ben-Gurion once again mobilized science not in order to understand the laws of the universe but in order to control nature and to harness it in the service of humanity. Not only did he not consider the Mediterranean a "lak" whose importance had to be diminished or which did not need to be recognized at all, but he said that "just as we have come here to make the desert bloom, so we have come here to conquer the expanses of the sea."

The "Canaanite group" was a cultural movement founded in 1939 by the poet Yonatan Ratosh (1908-1981) which called to separation between the Hebrews (Canaanite) who lived in Palestine and the Jews in the Diaspora. The Canaanites, more than any other ideological faction, had the idea that in their past the Hebrews were Mediterranean in their character and activities. Already in 1915, Itamar Ben-Avi

(1888–1943), an Israeli journalist and Zionist activist, in his article “Our Future is Also on the Sea” described the “glorious maritime past” of the Hebrews, and claimed that only “if the Jews will again be people of the sea, only if many of our new tribes again become Canaanite Zebuluns, will there be a complete resolution of our hopes.” (Ben-Avi, 1930: 68) The Canaanites were also influenced by Jeremiah Halperin (1901–1962), Jabotinsky’s adjutant in the defense of Jerusalem, responsible for the nautical section of Betar, captain of the ship “Sarah A” (Aaronsohn) and the formulator of a Hebrew nautical ideology as against the Socialist ideology that sanctified the soil (Amin, 2000). He regretted the fact that, among all the Mediterranean peoples, all of whom were sailors and owners of ships, Israel was absent. This was not because the Hebrew fleet was of a lower standard in the history of early ships than that of the other Mediterranean peoples, but because exiic Judaism (with some exceptions) did not provide the possibility of participating in the nautical profession, which was considered an aristocratic profession in the countries bordering the sea (Halperin, 1970). Halperin referred to the book of Raphael Patai, (1910–1996, a Jewish ethnographer and anthropologist) *The Children of Noah: Jewish Seafaring in Ancient Times* (Patai, 1938), in which it was claimed that the development of ships and seamanship is a criterion of cultural development, and it declared, “the Hebrew people wrote one of the most glorious pages in the history of the seamanship of the Mediterranean peoples.” Moreover, the Jews, who had fourth place among the coastal peoples before the Second World War and were known for their talent in trade, their initiative and their capacity for international organization, would know how to exploit this geographical advantage in order once again to take their proper place. The idea of the resurrection of Hebrew seamanship is connected here with the Mediterranean character of the Hebrew state.

Halperin based himself in his findings on the researches of “the young scholar in Paris who called himself ‘El Raid’.” One can learn about this pen-name of the researcher of the ancient East Adia Horon (1907–1972), the intellectual father of the Canaanite movement, from an article by Zeev Jabotinsky (1880–1940), the leader of the Zionist Revisionist movement. The article “Israel and Carthage”, based on a series of articles that Horon published in *Rassvet*, the revisionist Russian-language journal, in Paris under the pseudonym “El Raid” (in Arabic, the *Observer*) Jabotinsky claimed that the Phoenicians were kith and kin of the Hebrew people, and extended their culture as far

as Carthage. Hannibal was one of the great Hebrew heroes and the *lingua franca* of the Mediterranean Basin was Hebrew. Jabotinsky also saw Carthage as a kind of inscription on a potsherd: that is, one piece of evidence among many of the Semitic origin of the Mediterranean idea. At the Betar Congress in Danzig in 1931, Jabotinsky gave his blessing to Adia Horon who founded the “Alliance of Youth of the Sea—*Ziv Rodei Gaf*” (the Association of the Rulers of the Waves, known as *Rodei Gaf*), a movement to prepare the youth of Betar for a life of seamanship. A nucleus of the movement was founded in Tunis next to the ruins of Carthage, a sailing ship was acquired, a nautical periodical *Le Cran* was published, and there was even a fantastic plan to overrun the islands of the Straits of Tiran as a first stage for the conquest of the whole of Palestine (Halperin, 1965). The Canaanite source of the Hebrew attraction to the Mediterranean Sea is to be found in the writings of Adia Horon, and it continues until today in the writings of the poet Aharon Amir (1923–2008), one of the Canaanite leaders. Amir stated in his article “The Sea, the Last Sea” which appeared in 1996 for the inauguration of the “Forum for Mediterranean Cultures”, that the Mediterranean (“the Philistine Sea”, “the Last Sea”) is an organic part of the infrastructure of the Hebrew culture and its world-view (Amir, 1996). The bearers and revivers of the Hebrew cultural heritage should not in his opinion feel themselves to be guests in the ancient sea but should be full partners and equal citizens in the Mediterranean Basin. In one place, Amir points out three potential dangers in the Mediterranean option: an idealization and sentimentalization of the Mediterranean, which is “one of the seas most steeped in blood in the history of mankind” (Amir, 1985: 6); a dependency on the history, true in itself, of the Jewish Diaspora in the Mediterranean Basin; and a community-based ideology of the type of the “oriental heritage”, which can interfere with a comprehensive national view of Israel as a Mediterranean nation.

The poet Erez Biton, editor of *Apiron—Mediterranean Journal* and founder of “The International Mediterranean Centre in Israel”, also sees an affinity between the Canaanite group and the Mediterranean ideology:

The Canaanite teaching of Jonathan Ratosh also sought, in the final analysis, to give an Eastern dimension to Israeli existence, and it too received a death-blow with the founding of the state, precisely because of that oriental basis. Therefore, strangely enough, we, the oriental Jews, can find a common denominator with the Canaanite teachings in the

common attempt to give a special content to our reality here (Biton, 1983: 4).

Adaptation to a comprehensive Mediterranean entity would in his opinion give the Israelis an authentic force of existence, and "would rescue us from the comparison with the crusaders, who were here for only a short time." A semantic distinction or distinction of meaning between "Mediterranean" and "Middle Eastern" or "Oriental" is made in various contexts, and Biton chooses to make a tactical use of the first formula: "It seems to me that the difference between 'Mediterraneanism' and 'orientalism' is only a semantic difference, and especially in the case of my use of the formula Mediterraneanism, because this formula can be easily accepted in the very polarised society in which we live." (*ibid.*) Poet Natan Yonatan (1923–2004) shared this view:

Why do I sometimes prefer to use the concept 'Mediterranean culture', or similar concepts? I cannot support this with any argument or any scientific justification, but I want to bring it about that the people who will listen to me or who will think about the things I say about culture will try to think about culture in concrete, realistic terms.... In my opinion, to say 'Mediterranean culture' is a good way of speaking about our culture, our literature (Yonatan, 1983).

The cultural critic Gabriel Moked stresses another aspect:

In my opinion, we must distinguish between the Mediterranean cultural world and the Middle Eastern cultural world.... The Middle Eastern Muslim culture is to a great degree very fanatical and far from any true symbiosis with the West. As against this, the Mediterranean culture is basically pluralistic, impregnated with the various influences of 'Mare Nostrum'. It is partly European and partly Levantine.... Mediterraneanness means among other things openness and refinement, cultural variety and possibilities of dialogic between different religions, and cultures that are not homogeneous (Moked, 1985: 6).

The Israeli-Palestinian poet Mohammed Ghanayem points out the dialectical aspect of the Mediterranean option:

One must speak about a cultural synthesis that cannot turn into a cultural invasion, even if the result is a cultural operation that brings together worlds that are different and even opposite to each other. In this respect, Israel can provide a good example of a broad spread of civilizations if it relates on an equal basis to the cultures of the minorities within it, Arabs and Jews, Ashkenazis and Sephardis, all of whom can make up a new Israeli cultural identity that can save the region from an expected cultural desolation (Ghanayem, 1985: 6).

It is an interesting fact that many of the Israeli poets, writers and artists wrote and produced in Israel as if they had never heard the sound of waves lapping the Eastern shore of the Mediterranean, as if the people of the mountains and desert had overcome the people of the sea and the shore. But a few poets nevertheless stand out, and first among them Saul Tchernikovsky (1875–1943), who wrote about the wanderings of the Hebrew poet and his longing to reach the Mediterranean: "I wandered from sea to sea all the days of my life/ and it was my desire to reach the southern sea/ and my way was fenced around with mountains..." (Ohana, 2000: 141). Uri Zvi Greenberg (1896–1981) cursed the fate that decreed that he should be born in Christian Europe, and in 1929 chose the Mediterranean, his poetic mentor, the landscape of his chosen motherland: "And I learn the teaching of the rhythm of the water:/ I have chosen you among the teachers, O Mediterranean, as my teacher of poetry! / The salt of your waters is the salt of my blood and my tears. / Forgive, for I was wrongly not born on your shores." (Greenberg, 1979: 101) The poet Harold Schimmel came from beyond the sea, beyond the Atlantic Ocean, and in a short poem he listed his Mediterranean heroes: "Abra(ha)m/Or-phe-us/Jesus/Appo-lon-ius." (Schimmel, 1933: 36) Ayn (Omer) Hillel (1926–1990), one of the leaders of the new Hebrew poetry before the founding of the state and after it, sang a hymn of praise, "The Voice of Many Waters", to a pagan melody in the manner of Tchernikovsky and Schneur: "I stand and wonder at the sea/ and my body stirs like the expanse of the sea/the sea, the idolatrous sea/mighty as rebellion/ like a mass of men exultant in strife and battle,/ and its roar is hot and blue and overwhelming/as a nightmare is overwhelming./The mighty sea abundant in power." The most Mediterranean Israeli poet is undoubtedly Israel Pinkas, who describes his wanderings on the sea shore, and concludes, in his poem "Mediterranean Song", "In our ancient sea/there is nothing new/Only the wind changes." (Pinkas, 1999: 7) Pinkas experiences the Mediterranean in Braudelian stretches of "extended time", ignoring the ravages of time and the tragedies of history. The Florentine merchant who wanted to sell red-tinted glass in the year 1401 still does the same today. This freezing of time gives a sense of stability.

The Tel-Aviv poets Natan Zach, Moshe Dor and Moshe Ben Shaul also have their private moments facing the Mediterranean (Zach, 1974; Dor, 1965; Ben Shaul, 1966), and only Meir Wieseltier in his poem "Depths of a Bottle" (1976) declares that the heavy weight of

ideology and history in the Mediterranean area are like compresses defining the blood of the individual (Wieselier, 1976).

Wieselier was nevertheless sympathetic to the first Hebrew city, situated on the seashore. The sociologist Ma'oz Azaryahu, in his book *Tel Aviv, Mythography of a City* (2005), entitled the Mediterranean chapter "The Most Beautiful Place in Tel-Aviv: the Seashore". However, Meir Dizengoff, the first mayor, reacted as follows to reservations about his plan to create an industrial area on the shore of the city: "Jews have no interest in sea-bathing. Industry is more important." (Azaryahu, 2005: 273) As against this, the novelist and poet Shalom Asch (1880–1957) expressed enthusiasm for the seashore: "Every Jew, and I among them, ask two things of God: a place in paradise in the next world and a place on the seashore in Tel-Aviv in this one." (*ibid.*: 278) The opposite attitudes of Dizengoff and Asch represent the whole spectrum of ideas about the relationship of the city and its institutions to its Mediterranean location. The sentiments expressed by Asch correspond to the geography of collective redemption in which the Tel-Aviv shore represented the new liberated Jewish existence. It was precisely because the shore was free of elements of national renewal and building the land that it revealed in the most extraordinary way the normality of the life lived by the Jews which, in the final analysis, was the purpose of the Zionist vision. Dizengoff's remark anticipated (and perhaps was a kind of self-fulfilling prophecy of) the repeated criticism, formulated by the critic Hedda Boshes, for example, that "the streets of Tel-Aviv run away from the sea as if they were frightened of it and of the dangers that lurk there." (Boshes, 1978) Azaryahu quoted from a story in a children's book published on the eighteenth anniversary of the foundation of Tel-Aviv. In the story it was asked, "Why was the first Hebrew city built with its back to the sea?" The reason given was that the founders and builders of the city were frightened of the monsters living in the sea. In fact, the architects of the city failed to pay enough attention to the sea. The main roads run parallel to the sea and do not give onto it; the big hotels obstruct the sea view. Because of the lack of a planning tradition, the planners of the city "ignored the sea, [and that fact] showed that the position of the city on the shores of the Mediterranean had a far-reaching influence on the character of Tel-Aviv." (Azaryahu, 2005: 305)

Despite the criticism, however, the sea played a decisive role in the mental and cultural geography of Tel-Aviv, and an expression of this is the reference to the sea and the seaboard in the iconography of the

city. The Zionist outlook that saw Tel-Aviv as a haven for the Jews is reflected in the symbol of the city, in the center of which stands a lighthouse. The promenade and the shore as boundaries separating while also joining the city and the sea personify the sea and the city as complementary opposites (Feige, 2006).

Only recently did Israeli literature open a window on the Mediterranean. Y. B. Yehoshua is rightly considered the Mediterranean Israeli author par excellence, but the path to the Mediterranean of Amos Oz, who initially did not wish to go there, is also interesting. The young Oz, who was of the school of thought of Micha Josef Berdyczewski (1865–1921), believed that vital creative powers were the main thing, and not the local form, which was seen as sentimental and provincial. Later, Oz depicted the Israeli society-in-formation as one with characteristic Mediterranean qualities: warm of heart and temperament, hedonistic, life-loving and emotional. Israel will continue to develop as a Mediterranean society, he concluded, for better or worse, if its conflict with its neighbors is resolved. He saw Ashdod as the national Mediterranean profile coming into being before his eyes. He looked at the town of Ashdod with resignation, with the sadness of a householder whose dream has evaporated like the dreams of those Socialist world-reformers, the fathers of the kibbutz (Oz, 1986–1987; Oz 1990). Here he surprisingly broke forth as follows in 1998, in his book *The Same Sea*, not as a romantic beginning or as a fanfare, but describing a sea, olives and cheese. This poetic novel takes place by the Mediterranean—not in Jerusalem and not in Hulda but in Bat-Yam and Tel-Aviv (and also in Tibet). It is not surprising that critics compared *The Same Sea* to Natan Alterman's *Summer Festival*, which also took place in a Mediterranean city, Jaffa. Among his contemporary Israeli characters, bereft of dreams, living an everyday existence, there are figures who reflect the sea, and there is even a "Mediterranean philosophy". And as if all this were not enough, Oz's Mediterranean "repentance" is expressed in a play in the form of a poem-chapter, "Exile and Kingdom", that suggests a closeness, admirable if late, to Albert Camus, the lyrical prosaist of the Mediterranean (Oz, 2001).

"With its back to the sea"—that is how the art critic Gideon Ofrat describes the relationship of Israeli art to the sea in general and the Mediterranean in particular. Joseph Zaritsky (1891–1985), the formative modernist painter who is the target of post-Zionist catapults, "stood with his back to the sea and painted the distant hills of Ramat-Gan... and behind him, right below him, was the sea. To go there,

yes. To paint it, no!?" (Ofrat, 2004: 37) It was the same with the painter from Jerusalem Arieh Aroch (1908–1974), or Zvi Meirovitch (1911–1974), the painter from Haifa, who looked more at the plants of the Carmel Range than at the sea at the foot of the mountains. It is true there was Nahum Gutman (1898–1980), but in general the sea was absent from Israeli painting, and a visitor who happened to stop over in Israel would find it hard to believe he is in a country bordering the Mediterranean. There are dark and mysterious surrealist depictions, but not the sea light and not maritime landscapes. The contemporary painters do with Israeli painting what the big hotels in Tel-Aviv have done: they block out the sea. Why do they ignore it? "From our very roots, it may be that the Jewish gents, which never liked the sea, re-collected from it... also, the generation of the founding-fathers of Israeli culture was a generation that had lived in little Jewish shtetls far from the sea-shore... a ghetto-experience too closed in for the Jewish artist coming to the country to adapt to the open sea." (*ibid*) One is bound to admit, Ofrat began his analysis of the historian of the Israeli literature Hanan Hever, that Zionist self-realization required land but not sea! However, if the Israeli painters today do not paint the sea, they also ignore the valleys, the mountains, the streets and the buildings. The door of the studio is locked against the outside world. "Israeli art remains relatively cut off, but it is perhaps the beginning of a long process of Mediterranean colourisation." (*ibid*: 47)

Unlike the Israeli writers, poets and painters who hesitated on the shore uncertain of their identity, the musicians were the first to leap into the Mediterranean. Perhaps the reason is to be found in the sensitive, direct medium, the ear open to the sound of a ceaseless melody. In her article "Israel and the Emergence of the Mediterranean Identity: Expressions of Locality in Music and Literature" (2006), the cultural researcher Alexandra Nocke suggested that the new Mediterranean identity could be a solution to the identity-crisis of the Israelis, who had exhausted all the old ideological models that no longer corresponded to the needs, problems and requirements of Israeli society (Nocke, 2006). Mediterraneanness, as a non-exclusive point of view, is in fact a real and attractive possibility for many elements in the population. The Mediterranean discourse, which was random and fragmentary until the end of the 1990s, gained impetus in the 1990s and found an echo in cultural practices and in daily life. Because of the geographical proximity of Israel to countries like Greece and Turkey, music was instrumental in bringing together the musical affinities of

different ethnic communities, creating a Levantine-global combination, to use the expression of the musician Kobi Oz, who saw Mediterranean music as a synthesis of Tunisia and MTV: that is to say, of the local and universal. Thus, Mediterranean music was a highly effective agent of cultural cohesion. Until the 1980s, the idea did not correspond to the situation: from the 1990s onwards, theory and practice have gone together. The fall of the Soviet bloc and the end of the confrontation between East and West, the shift of Europe towards the Mediterranean Basin and the rise of multiculturalism encouraged regional connections and fostered a multicultural dialogue in Israel. The academic discourse and that in the media gained added validity with the fusion of the ethos with the different affected groups (Malkin, 1997: 29–33).

For many years, the Mediterranean identity was a neglected option in Israel. The Jewish Israelis had a suspicious and hostile attitude to the sea (there was no sea in the towns of Eastern Europe or Iraq), perhaps because it was associated with wandering, or perhaps because the Israelis had an ethos of conquering the land. The historian Irad Malkin has an interesting explanation for this. His theory is that whereas the Israelites came out of the desert and settled in the land as in the biblical myth of the exodus from Egypt, in modern times the Jews came to the country via the Mediterranean and settled mainly along the coasts. This change had a demographic significance and political and ideological consequences. Until the 1940s, the existence of the Jews along the coast did not result in territorial ambitions of annexing parts of the biblical heartland. After the conquest of the West Bank in the Six Day War there was a strengthening of the consciousness of settling the hills and the inner parts of the country on the part of those on the political right, but the normative "coastal existence" remained as it was and became even stronger. Malkin expects the Mediterranean idea to be important in the future, perhaps without any need to resurrect the past and reinvent it, through the sheer force of reality, through social and cultural circumstances. Israel, after all, is much closer in its way of life to Greece, Italy and Spain than to countries like Holland, Germany or Poland. Open-air cafés, a bustling night-life, articles of food like baguettes, croissants and Tunisian sandwiches, many "taverna" programs on the Israeli television channels, economic and touristic links with the Mediterranean countries, and the acceptance in literary circles of Mediterranean images—all these are the first signs of a Mediterranean culture. In the opinion of many,

the Mediterranean option is not a call for ethnic isolation or a return to roots, but a striving for a common cultural platform that would smooth out separate tensions and identities. The Mediterranean ethos is too ancient, important and central to be yet another reason for ethnic seclusion, for advancing sectional interests, folkloric tendencies or sentimental yearnings. Malkin concludes:

Ever since it was founded, the State of Israel has been faced with the question: should it be European or oriental? Should one create here a “Vienna on the banks of the Yarkon” or should one create a new “Levant”, or even choose “Canaanism” and partnership in a “Semitic space”? Today more than ever, there is a need to encourage a cultural process and to clarify Israel’s place in the Mediterranean context.

Precisely because it has no strong national ideology, the Mediterranean offers Israel a richly-textured cultural orientation, drawing on the extensive Mediterranean and other connections of the people of Israel in the past together with the challenging Mediterranean and international reality of our own day. Moreover, the Mediterranean provides Israel, which is a multicultural society grappling with the ideological consequences of the melting pot, a multicultural model nourished by cross-fertilisation. The Mediterranean is not only a geographical or historical area but also a metaphorical entity with frontiers and a variety of cultures and identities, which came into being through an incessant discourse among them. All these have helped to preserve its unique character. The perpetual interaction between them has created a culture that is basically multicultural (Malkin, 2005: 12).

According to the critic Yoram Bronowski (1948–2001), a reinterpretation of Israel’s place in the area is required:

I am convinced, like many others, that the dream to which Israeli society should be directed, to which it can direct itself, is the most ancient of humanity’s dreams—the Mediterranean dream. A sort of Mediterranean Scroll of Independence with Mediterranean inflections rings all the time in my ears: “On the shores of the Mediterranean, the Jewish people arises, etc.” I think of the connections and ancient contexts—Phoenicia, Crete, Greece, all maritime countries—and those that came after them. And I dream of Israel as one of the centres of neo-Mediterraneanism, just as it was a centre and one of the sources of the ancient Mediterraneanism (Bronowski, 1987).

There has been a notable tendency on the part of many Israelis to develop a strategic policy of supporting a regional culture that permits a dialogue between the peoples of different countries and between the different peoples in the Mediterranean Basin, especially at its Eastern end. Many people in Israeli society have begun to call for a strength-

ening of the peace process in the Middle East following the Oslo Accords through an expansion of the cultural links between the states of the Mediterranean Basin and through a removal of the barriers between peoples. The Mediterranean option is put forward not only as a cultural proposition but as strategic geopolitical aspiration in its own right. Have the intensification of the Israeli occupation and the rise of Islamic fundamentalism made Mediterraneanism redundant?

An early proponent of the Mediterranean Basin as the proper sphere for Israel to relate to was Abba Eban (1915–2002), the first Israeli minister of foreign affairs. Already in 1952 he discerned two distinct advantages in the Mediterranean option: the chance of breaking Israel’s political and cultural isolation (for in the Muslim and Arab Middle East, Israel was the exception), and the exploitation of the commercial and cultural connections that Israel had with most of the countries of the Mediterranean Basin:

If the State of Israel seeks to find its own way within the area as a whole, if it wants to find itself a world that would be more fitting for the expression of its political relationships and cultural affinities, I think the concept “Mediterranean” would be the most suitable: Israel, not as a Middle Eastern country but as a Mediterranean country. The Mediterranean is the only channel of intercourse between Israel and the rest of the world. All Israel’s trade and connections pass through that sea. If this is true as a geographical fact, it is all the more true from a historical and cultural point of view (Eban, 1952: 7).

The first sign of a partnership between Europe and the Mediterranean countries could be seen in the Barcelona Conference that was held on the 27th of November 1995, and that was attended, apart from the fifteen countries of the European Union, by twelve countries of the Mediterranean Basin, including Israel. There was a considerable acceleration of the process from 1989 onwards, with the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union, for at that time the European Union began to direct its efforts southwards towards the countries of the Maghreb and the Mediterranean in accordance with models whose success had already been proved in Eastern Europe. Towards the end of 1994 an explicit policy began to be formed of encouraging links between Europe and the Mediterranean countries. The “Barcelona process” had three main objectives: a political and security partnership that would create an area of peace, democracy and human rights; an economic partnership that would create an area of free trade; and a cultural and social partnership that would develop

a civil society and encourage relations between the countries of the European Union and the Mediterranean partners and between the countries of the Union themselves. The main obstacle to a partnership between Europe and the Mediterranean countries was the conflict in the Middle East. The peace process in the Middle East in the 1990s permitted the implementation of the first steps of a new Mediterranean policy, including the invitation of Israel to regional forums, a large majority of whose participants were from Arab countries. Although the El-Aqsa intifada and the Second Lebanese War slowed down many of these developments, Israel, like the European Union, still has a strong interest in promoting political and economic stability in the area and stopping fundamentalism (Lerman, 2007). Many people think the Mediterranean option would contribute to this.

### *The Mediterranean Moment*

Even after a decade of fruitful discourse devoted to discussion of the Israeli Mediterranean identity, it is hard to rid oneself of the persistent hegemonic relationship implicit in the title of the article "Jewish Mediterranean Culture, Semantics and Metaphors", in *New Jewish Time: Jewish Culture in a Secular Age—An Encyclopaedia View* (Shavit, 2008). The hegemonic culture creates the "other" in relation to which or in contrast to which it defines itself, and at the same time it implies that in the "other" there is something lacking or missing. A good example of this historiographical deficiency is the Mediterranean option.

Some Israeli historians have claimed that a Mediterranean culture is a fabricated idea, an invention, that was not created by the peoples of the Mediterranean but by others, tourists and travelers, who at the end of the eighteenth century first visualized the Mediterranean world as a single geographical and cultural entity with its own distinctive character. Prominent among these is the historian Yaakov Shavit, editor of the collection *A Mediterranean Anthology* (2004), which appeared in the Mediterranean series of the project of the Centre for Mediterranean Culture in Tel-Aviv University. Shavit sees the Mediterranean region from the outside, so adopting the ideological perspective of the northern Europeans who in the time of the Enlightenment gave descriptions of the Orient and Southern Europe. Although the collection mainly consists of direct quotations from authors, historians and anthropologists of European culture, this, he claims, does not demon-

strate any "Eurocentrism" on his part but the "historical fact", as he puts it, that "Mediterraneanness" is not a spatial identity of the inhabitants of the Mediterranean Basin. In his opinion, it was the Europeans, especially the "northerners", who created the idea of the Mediterranean as a natural environment and a human environment and conceived of the Mediterranean region as a world-in-itself: "The development of Mediterraneanness is a chapter in the intellectual-cultural history of Europe in the dialogue it created with the Mediterranean world." (Shavit, 2004: 31) Only in the twentieth century, he maintains, did some inhabitants of the Mediterranean Basin adopt the idea that they lived in a special area that was the cradle of human culture. According to this Eurocentric point of view, it was only when the modern Greeks and Italians were exposed to the discoveries of the North Europeans that they first became aware of their classical heritage! The Mediterranean idea, the essence of which was the recognition that the riches of world culture originated in the area around the Mediterranean Basin, was withheld from the local inhabitants, and they needed the north European "other" to define for them their spatial identity, their special contribution and their universal culture.

If this is the case, the Mediterraneanness of the local inhabitants is inauthentic, an imaginary identity proposed, dictated, planted and disseminated by "others". What is demonstrated in Shavit's critique is a "theoretical colonialism" similar to the "cultural colonialism" of presumed white superiority in Africa, the "pedagogical colonialism" of the British in Asia, and the "religious colonialism" of the Christians in Africa and South America. Today, the Muslim immigrants in Europe practice a "reverse colonialism", saying, "Yesterday you came to us and tried to condition and direct our identity; today we come to you and seek to prescribe your identity." The Mediterranean idea set in motion a dialectical process of far-reaching significance in welding a geo-cultural area into a single entity that included both "East" and "West". But when Shavit attempted to examine the validity of the Mediterranean idea as applied to Israel, he took his Eurocentric approach and adapted it to the Israelis. In his opinion, the Israelis who favor the Mediterranean option have adopted an external approach like the North Europeans: "Those who long to be rooted in the natural Mediterranean landscape look at it with the eyes of visitors from outside." (Shavit, 1996) He sees the Mediterranean idea as "a harmless entertainment which can be presented as another ingredient in the sought-after recipe for 'identity', if not its very essence." There is a

total rejection here of Jacqueline Kahanoff's idea of culture (Ohana, 2006: 239–263), and in the words of the Tel-Aviv historian, "In this entertainment, even 'Levantinism' is rescued from its stigma of shallow superficiality and puts on a garment of fruitful cultural openness." (*ibid.*) The idea of a Mediterranean identity, he claims, is unsustainable in itself: it is either an attempt to be "oriental" in Mediterranean fancy-dress or a sophisticated way of remaining in "Europe". In the year 2007, Shavit once again ridiculed the Mediterranean idea, and wrote: "Mediterraneanness is bluff, but harmless bluff that does not hurt anyone." (Shavit, 2007b)

Unlike Shavit, the historical geographer Meron Benvenisti thinks that the Mediterranean option for Israel was invented not in order to disengage from Western culture, the one the Israelis favor, but as a Levantine replacement that would enable them to avoid a real encounter with Islamic culture and the Arab neighbors. The connection with the sea is a roundabout route to a land connection: it is easier to stretch one's hands across the sea than to turn towards the continent, where there are Palestinians. "The creators of the 'Mediterranean option' have reared neo-Canaanites" (Benvenisti, 1996), writes Benvenisti, who on his own admission supports a coexistence between the two sons of the land, and has always hoped that their sense of belonging to a common homeland would prove stronger than their enmity as hostile neighbors. The title of Shavit's article, "An Entertaining but Illusory Idea", and of Benvenisti's article, "Escapism that Ends with a Slip of Arak", shows how critical and skeptical the two of them are about the Mediterranean option for Israel. The two articles were published in a special supplement to the newspaper *Ma'ariv*, which bore the title "Pergola and Rosemary, or We and Mediterraneanness", and appeared in 1996 with the founding of the Mediterranean Forum in the Van Leer Institute. The journalist Haim Hanegbi, the editor of the supplement, expressed himself cynically about the founders of the forum, saying that they wanted to

make life on the shores of the Mediterranean into a thriving and agreeable culture. No more isolation but openness; no longer a reservation but a wide-open space, a release from the ghetto. For a moment it has seemed that our geography, an abiding natural condition since the foundation of the world, has become before our eyes a cause for rejoicing. Israel is no longer a widow among the peoples of the sea, for they are about to embrace one another in order to renew their days as of old and restore to this Basin, the oldest sea on the planet, the glory of its youth (Hanegbi, 1996).

The poet Salman Masalha also joined in the criticism of the "flight" from the Middle East:

Israeli society, which specialises in inventing detours, starting with the bypass roads in the occupied Palestinian territories and ending with the parliamentary bloc at the Knesset, is trying to lay another bypass road in the form of a Mediterranean culture, a road that bypasses the new Middle East. The Jewish-Israeli tribe is ready to bypass the heart and go as far as Morocco, Tunisia and Algiers in order to run away from the real struggle, not only with the place, here and now, but also with the local inhabitants (Masalha, 1996).

And as if these body-blows to Mediterraneanism were not enough, Hanan Hever comes along and adds to the assertion that the Mediterranean idea is a North European invention, the claim that the Mediterranean is a projection of Western Zionism. For him, the hegemonic Zionist culture is also a Eurocentric narrative in the form of a journey from West to East, from exile to redemption, from one territory to another, with an obliteration of the sea, a cleansing and purifying contraction of the middle distance. The sea has no value itself, but is only a means of transition to Zion, the hoped-for land, the true utopia. The sea is the land's "other", the "other" that has to be crossed, to be left behind (Hever, 2000: 181–195). It is not surprising that the Zionist-Israeli tale "With His Own Hands: Alik's Story", written by the writer Moshe Shamir in memory of his fallen brother Alik, begins with the classic sentence "Alik came out of the sea." The ultimate Sabra is not a native of the history-laden Israeli territory but the product of a new experience, free from all traces of the past. The emergence from the sea is an act that cleanses the birth of the Sabra. There is an ideologization of the sea as an experience bereft of ideology. The sea is the opposite of the heavy-laden Zionist content of the land. The sea is nothing, an obliterated arca between the negativity of exile and the positivity of Israeliness, between "there" and "here", between Europe and the Levant. The Mediterranean Sea has no status of its own, no affirmative presence: only in the sea can something come out of nothing. The birth of Alik the Sabra is an *ex nihilo* myth that is doomed to extinction: from the water he has emerged and to dust he shall return. His end is known in advance, in the same way as that of Shamir's other hero, Uri, in the play *He Walked in the Fields*, whose actual body and whose metaphysical image were blown to pieces.

The repression and obliteration of the sea and the placing of the land in opposition to the sea was in Hever's opinion a form of imagery

that represented an exclusive meta-narrative: i.e. there is no land except Zion, and everything around it is repressed and obliterated. The sea is a national covering metaphor that conceals the Zionist territorial violence and the Palestinian and oriental “other” by representing “others” as citizens and human beings from north or west of the Mediterranean Basin (Hever, 2007). The sea-crossing of Zionist immigration signifies a change of identity (rite of passage), an ideological pilgrimage and a utopian venture by means of a ship. Zion in place of the “other” requires a reductive leap: one must leap over the sea. As against the Zionist utopia there is the heterotypical narrative of the oriental Jews in Israel, whose immigration, in Hever’s words, embodied the “accepted, symbolic, normative crossing of the sea.” (*ibid.*) At the same time, Hever contradicted himself and claimed that all the oriental Jews crossed a contiguous body of territory represented by the territorial contiguity of the Middle East. He made even the immigration of the North African Jews which took place across the Mediterranean fit this one-dimensional ideological interpretation. The trouble with comprehensive historiographical theses is that they are ideological meta-narratives that subordinate all the facts to a single explanation.

### *East and West*

The architect and the theoretician Sharon Rotbard continued the line of thought of Benvenisti, and to a certain degree of Shavit and Hever, seeing the Mediterranean option as an ideological proposition in which the Mediterranean Sea “is the ultimate place of escape, escapism personified.... More than it is a fantasy, it is an ideology that I might call ‘Mediterraneanism’.” (Rotbard, 2005a) On the one hand, it represents the invention of a Mediterranean entity that fuses together many identities, a variety of types and periods into an ideal generality, and on the other hand it represents an obliviousness to the tensions that exist in the Basin. This obliviousness takes the form of a flight from the blood-bath in the Middle East to the cradle of Mediterranean culture, from “the horrors that have made the Mediterranean what it is” to its depiction as “a sort of decorative cover of a cookery-book.” The Mediterranean, here, is a selective recollection involving both a short period—seasonal memories of the annual vacation, the sensuality of summer—and a long period, universal and archaeological: “What is the Israeli-Palestinian conflict next to the eternity of the Mediterranean

mean? ... and in this respect, in this project of Mediterraneanism, in creating an approved area of agreement, a kind of public domain of memory, culture and history, there are undoubtedly some positive elements.” (*ibid.*) Rotbard suggests, however, that we should treat this ideology, whose expressions can be banal and kitchy, with suspicion. In his opinion, it is “a sort of cultural religion of openness and love of life and people”, whose architectural equivalents are logos like “Club Mer”, “Pueblo Español”, “Givat Andromeda” and “Hotel Lutraki” in Greece.

There has never been a critical discussion of the political and moral significance of the Mediterraneanisation of Israeli culture. The aim of such a discussion, says Rotbard, would be to expose the colonialist nature of projects like the restoration of the Arab Israeli village Ein Hod, the restoration and renovation of the Old City of Jaffa and the creation of the Irgun Museum, Beit Gidi, in Jaffa. The desire to belong gives birth to “a culture that is basically not only alien to its environment but to a large degree hostile to it.” (*ibid.*) Domination of the East was achieved through a typical process of colonization like the physical expropriation of a place: the dispossession of the local inhabitants drew them into the Western socio-economic context. For instance, Jews were the owners of the properties of the Arabs of Jaffa who still lived in their houses; Israeli architects were the preservers of the Jaffa style of building. The most outstanding example of this geographical and historical dissonance is “Beit Gidi at Menashya, a museum in the shape of a glass box of the school of the architect Mies van der Rohe, one of the leaders of the Bauhaus, built over the remains of an old Jaffa stone house.” Beit Gidi “is an example of an aesthetics and rhetoric of ruin and destruction, an example of how to commemorate death and obliteration.” “Mediterraneanism” is mobilized in the service of the Zionist ideology: “The whole natural cycle of obliteration, destruction, extermination and making the desert bloom is simply the necessary background for the real allegory of Mediterraneanism, which is to be found with us in *Alneiland / Tel-Aviv*.” (Rotbard, 2005b)

This view of “Mediterraneanism” was shared by Sami Abu Shehab, an inhabitant of Jaffa who conducts subversive tours of his city in reaction to the celebration of the “white city”, Tel-Aviv. “Tel-Aviv did not grow out of just anywhere,” he said, “it sprang out of Jaffa. It rebelled against its maker, and cast out and obliterated Jaffa, and it still tries to do so today.” (Zandberg, 2004) Thus, for example, in the famous photograph of the lottery for building plots in “little Tel-Aviv”

in 1909, two political narratives are represented: the ““Zionist” camera documents people set against deserted sands on the seashore, whereas the Palestinian perspective insists on what is missing, stressing the fact that the camera’s lens did not capture—and did not intend to capture—nearby Jaffa and the surrounding Palestinian villages with their orchards and vineyards. The architect Zvi Elhyani, in his article “Seafront Holdings” documented the history of Menashya, the area between Tel-Aviv and Jaffa, from the time it was a Muslim village in the nineteenth century to its conquest by the Irgun in the War of Independence, its period of neglect when it became a Jewish slum and the plans for immovable property connected with it from the 1960s onwards. The article is accompanied by an appendix of photographs from 1967: “*Fizkor* [Memorial Prayer] for Menashya” (Elhyani, 2004: 104–116).

In a similar way to Rotbard and Abu Shchadéh, the journalist Esther Zandberg called Beit Gidi “a Palestinian ruin transformed into a monument to those who destroyed it.” (Zandberg, 2004) In her article “Dreams of an Island”, she examined the catalogue of the Israeli exhibition “Back to the Sea” held in 2004 in the architectural Biennale in Venice, which dealt with the Tel-Aviv Jaffa coastline. In the Zionist vision, the boundaries of the Mediterranean coastal strip were not seen as final boundaries but were subject to continual negotiation, natural conditions and political circumstances. Architects and engineers, planners and politicians put forward schemes for a “spacial engineering” of the Mediterranean vision, and in their feverish minds constructed a fantasy “of the rosy future of Tel-Aviv and the State of Israel that cannot be realised on the existing soil.” Ever since the founding of the “white city” on the sands, a casino, an Olympic village, luxury hotels, buildings and towers were planned and imagined. The audacious dream of all of them was to build artificial islands opposite the shores of the city, “the fantasy of building on land liberated from the shackles of a complex history, and to depict an Israeli soil which no people lays claim to and that represents a new horizon, efficient, planned and better.” Indeed, this may have represented “the hope of getting away from the existing reality and of creating an alternative, utopian reality.” (*ibid.*) The debate on the Mediterranean option is a continuation of the debate that took place in the culture of the Hebrew renaissance on the East as an object of longing or as a place that threatened the Western mentality of the Zionist thinkers.

The “new Hebrew” faced two directions: he looked to the East but he also had his back to it. Zionism was characterized from its earliest days by its ambivalent attitude to the East. The positive attitude to the East was first expressed by figures such as Moses Lieb Lilienblum, Mordechai Zeev Feierberg, Itamar Ben-Avi, Nahum Sokolov, Yitzhak Ben-Zvi and David Ben-Gurion. Lilienblum saw the European Jews as aliens: “We are alien to our own race. We are Semites among the Aryans, sons of Shem among the sons of Japhet, a Palestinian tribe from Asia in European lands.” Feierberg declared to the Jews in his famous essay *Whither?*: “And you, my brethren, as you now go eastwards, you must always remember that you are orientals by birth.” Itamar Ben-Avi declared “We are Asiatics”, Sokolov wanted to create “a great Palestinian culture” (Rubinstein, 2000: 71–103), and Ben-Gurion said in 1925 that “the meaning of Zionism is that we are once again becoming an Oriental people.” (Ben Ami, 1998: 331)

The negative attitude was expressed in an *a priori* rejection of the Eastern option. Herzl declared in *The Jewish State*, “For Europe we can be part of the defensive wall against Asia; we can be outposts of culture against barbarism.” (Herzl, 1997) The historian Joseph Klausner saw his culture as a superior one, as he said in his article “Fear” (1905): “All our hope that we shall one day possess the land of our ancestors is not based on the sword, nor on the fist, but on the collective advantage we have over the Arabs and Turks.”

Is this attitude of some of the thinkers of Zionism in its early stages an outstanding example of the orientalist thesis put forward by Edward Said? Were certain varieties of Zionist perception of the East an example of a paternalistic relationship of the West to the East, or, more precisely, to the area of the Eastern Mediterranean? Here we have something much more complex than the out-and-out European orientalism because the East was seen not only as the site of the ancient history of the Jewish people but also as the supreme object of the people’s return to itself according to its vision; but to the same degree that the East was seen as the cure for the national distress of the Jewish people and the insignia of its national identity, it represented the “other”, it was external to the Zionist Jew, and was perceived as “there”, whether as a strange or even alien entity or as an object of insatiable longings. The growing attraction of the East for the nineteenth-century European romantics may be ascribed to a longing for ancient and authentic roots and to a common feeling among the intelligentsia that the West was in decline. It was this attraction that impelled Jews of

Zionist inclination to see the East not only as the cradle of their national identity or as a place of refuge but also as a source of values, strength and moral renewal for their people.

Zionism was born in Europe, and paradoxically the main choices of identity and cultural options for Israeli society—Socialism, nationalism, secularism, Messianism, Canaanism, “Crusaderism”—originated not in the Holy Land, but in Europe. Mediterraneanism as a cultural idea is also a theoretical option for Israeli identity. The Mediterranean idea has been effectively promoted in a number of Mediterranean countries as a program of collective ethos, suggesting directions of action, formulations of policy and cultural activities. The Mediterranean option is a possible bridge between Israel and its Arab neighbors, between Israel and Europe and between the Israelis and European Jewry.